

LGBTIQ HUMAN RIGHTS · POLICY BRIEF

SUPPORTING INTERSEX STUDENTS

October 2026 · outrightinternational.org

KEY POINTS

- Intersex children and young people face barriers to education due to **stigma, misinformation, and pressure to conform** to binary expectations about female and male bodies.
- Intersex learners experience violence and discrimination from peers and school staff, increasing the risk of dropping out. In Outright's global education survey, **54% of intersex respondents reported violence or discrimination** from other students.
- **Binary school policies and practices** can exclude and harm intersex learners. Gendered uniforms, bathrooms, changing facilities, sports, and other sex-segregated activities can compromise students' privacy, dignity, safety, and bodily autonomy.
- Intersex people are **largely invisible in school curricula**. In Outright's global survey, 73% of LGBTIQ respondents said their teachers did not discuss sex characteristics or the existence of intersex people in class.
- **Legal protections are inadequate**. Only 15 countries explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sex characteristics in education.
- Governments and schools should ensure intersex learners can **access education safely, equally, and with dignity** through antidiscrimination protections, inclusive curricula and educator training, supportive school policies and facilities, participation of intersex learners in decision-making, and improved research and data.



What is intersex?

Up to 1.7% of people are born with intersex traits—physical sex characteristics, such as sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, hormonal patterns, and/or chromosomal patterns, that do not fit typical definitions of male or female bodies.¹ Estimates of the prevalence of intersex traits vary considerably depending on which variations in sex characteristics are included. These characteristics may be visible at birth, detected prenatally, emerge during puberty, or not become apparent until later in life. There is a broad and diverse spectrum of innate variations in sex characteristics.

Being intersex relates to physical sex characteristics and is distinct from sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Intersex people may have any gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation.

Intersex people remain largely invisible in many societies due to stigma, misinformation, discrimination, and harmful practices intended to conceal or erase intersex variations.²



What human rights violations do intersex children experience?

To understand the experiences of intersex children as learners, it is important to recognize the broader human rights violations they may experience because of their innate sex characteristics.³

Right to bodily autonomy. One of the most serious human rights violations affecting intersex children is the performance of irreversible, nonconsensual, and medically unnecessary interventions, including

genital surgeries. These interventions are often intended to make intersex bodies conform to typical notions of female or male bodies. They should be postponed until the individual can actively participate in decision-making and provide their free and informed consent.⁴

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly expressed concern about the “severe physical and psychological suffering” caused by medically unnecessary procedures on intersex children. It has repeatedly called on States to ensure that children are not subjected to unnecessary medical or surgical treatment.⁵ However, only nine countries have restricted these harmful practices at a national level.⁶

Right to health. Intersex children and young people may face barriers to appropriate, intersex-affirming healthcare and experience discrimination in healthcare settings. Some also experience lifelong physical and psychological consequences from medically unnecessary interventions performed during childhood.⁷

Right to life. In some communities, particularly in parts of Africa and Asia, stigma and harmful beliefs surrounding intersex traits have reportedly resulted in infanticide.⁸ Such killings have been linked to beliefs that intersex children are “cursed” or that intersex deaths are taboo.⁹

Right to education. Many intersex children suffer discrimination, bullying, and even violence in school by peers, teachers, and other school personnel. In Outright International’s global education survey, **48 of 89 intersex respondents from 22 countries (54%) reported experiencing violence or discrimination at least once from students, and 16 intersex respondents (18%) also experienced these from school staff.**¹⁰ Only 15 countries explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sex characteristics in education.¹¹

In April 2024, the **UN Human Rights Council adopted a first-ever resolution dedicated to the rights of intersex persons**, calling on states to combat discrimination, violence, and harmful practices against intersex people.¹² Presented to the Council in September 2025 pursuant to the resolution, the **UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ landmark report** documented discriminatory laws

and policies, violence, and harmful practices against intersex persons. The report specifically recognized human rights violations experienced by intersex children in educational settings, and called on states and other stakeholders to take measures to address discrimination and violence.¹³



What forms of discrimination and violence do intersex children face in schools?

Every child has a right to education, including free and compulsory primary education and accessible secondary education.¹⁴ Educational environments frequently fail to recognize diversity in sex characteristics and bodily development, including intersex people’s variations in anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones.

Discrimination against intersex youth in educational settings takes many forms, from the absence of inclusive curricula and school policies to discriminatory laws and practices, bullying, and violence that can harm intersex learners physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

School curriculum. Intersex people and variations in sex characteristics are largely absent from school curricula. Outright International’s 2024–2025 global education survey drew 439 LGBTIQ responses from 49 countries, and 73% of respondents reported that their teachers did not discuss sex characteristics or the existence of intersex people in class.¹⁵ This invisibility can contribute to stigma and leave intersex learners without information that reflects their own bodies and experiences.¹⁶

Sexuality education should provide accurate, age-appropriate information about diversity in sex characteristics and the existence and lived realities of intersex people. Inclusive sexuality education can help challenge misinformation and stigma, contributing to safer, more inclusive learning environments.¹⁷

“The importance of inclusion of intersex in curricula is so complicated (though it seems simple) because the current practice is to hide the decisions from the intersex child. The medical system wants to prevent you from coming out of the box they put you in. What is needed is an acknowledgment of the breadth and diversity of the puberty experience to include intersex. This would have been life-changing for 15-year-old me.”

—Intersex activist Irene Kuzemko reflecting on her experience as a student in Russia¹⁸

Abuse and bullying. School-related gender-based violence includes acts or threats of sexual, physical, or psychological violence occurring in and around schools that are rooted in gender norms, stereotypes, and unequal power dynamics.¹⁹

Intersex students experience abuse and bullying from both peers and adults in educational settings. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights documented that intersex children face “verbal insults and physical violence, blackmail and sexual violence” from peers, teachers, and staff, increasing their risk of dropping out of school and limiting future opportunities.²⁰

Intersex students who responded to Outright International’s global education survey further described experiences of bullying, isolation, ostracization, sexual harassment, and other forms of abuse.²¹

- A student from **Northern Ireland**, Charlotte H., was bullied and ostracized by schoolmates because of her perceived difference. “I kept my head down, but there was always a threat of mockery or violence hanging over me.”²²
- Taylor H., an 18-year-old from the **U.S.**, shared that “physical harassment included picking me up, grabbing me in inappropriate places and areas of my body without consent, pulling my hair, pulling me into secluded areas...”²³
- Mercy M., a 22-year-old from **Kenya**, shared how other students made fun of her for being intersex.

“Mostly, it was verbal harassment about how your physical appearance is different from others. For instance, when I transferred to a new primary school, no girl wanted to associate with me since I had a deep voice. Same with boys, they kept talking about me and my broad chest and no breasts, and my body was hairier.”²⁴

School authorities may also perpetrate abuse or fail to protect intersex learners from discrimination.²⁵

- Enoch H., an intersex, nonbinary, and trans student from the **U.S.**, reported that “multiple rumors were spread that I was a demon/the literal devil/the anti-Christ because I was visibly gender nonconforming. I tried to go to the [administration], but they basically told me to shut up or get expelled.”²⁶
- Having attended boarding school in **Ghana** as a child, Fafali Akortsu recalled the pain of being called “a witch” by teachers and parents, and being forced to live in the basement of the dormitory, separated from other students.²⁷



How do gendered policies and practices in school affect intersex learners?

Strictly gendered school policies and practices can create particular barriers for intersex learners. School uniforms, bathrooms, changing facilities, sports, and other activities are often organized around binary assumptions about sex and gender that may exclude or expose intersex students.

Gendered uniforms. Strictly gendered school uniform policies can create specific challenges for intersex students whose identities, gender expression, or physical characteristics do not conform to the sex or gender expectations imposed on them at school. Such requirements can cause distress, force students to present in ways that conflict with their identities, and expose them to discrimination when they resist or seek alternatives.

In **Iran**, a nonbinary intersex student assigned female at birth described significant distress from being required to wear the gendered school uniform.

When the student resisted, teachers responded with discriminatory treatment, refusing to let them sit for tests and questioning the value of their continuing education.²⁸ An intersex student in **Kenya** also reported distress related to their school's inflexibility with uniform requirements, choosing to wear shorts until reaching the school gate, then putting a skirt over them for class.²⁹

Bathrooms and privacy. Bathrooms segregated by assigned sex at birth can create safety, privacy, and access concerns for intersex learners, particularly when a student's sex characteristics, gender identity, or gender expression do not conform to binary expectations about sex and gender.³⁰ In **Kenya**, an intersex student attending a girls' boarding school was denied access to the girls' bathroom by a security guard while participating in a sporting event at another school.³¹ In the **U.S.**, intersex advocate Hans Lindahl testified at the federal Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights public hearing about their experience as an intersex student. Lindahl explained that restroom and locker-room access was a significant problem and shared that they and other intersex students avoided using school restrooms because they did not feel safe. Lindahl described sometimes having to remain hidden in a bathroom stall until it felt safe to leave and going essentially the entire school day without using a restroom.³²

Sports and sex verification. Gender- or sex-segregated sports can expose intersex students to invasive practices. In the **U.S.**, sex-testing requirements in school athletics pose particular risks for intersex students, including invasive scrutiny of their bodies and medical information and potential pressure to undergo unwanted medical interventions.³³ In **Kenya**, an intersex student was forced to undergo a strip search to "confirm" their sex during a football match.³⁴ Such invasive practices raise serious concerns about students' privacy, dignity, bodily autonomy, and right to be free from degrading treatment.



What is gender-transformative education, and how does it relate to intersex students?

Gender-transformative education uses all aspects of an education system, from policies to classroom learning, to actively challenge and dismantle the root causes of gender inequality. It equips learners, educators, and communities to reshape harmful gender stereotypes and structural barriers, creating a more equitable society.

Gender-transformative education seeks to prevent discrimination, violence, and unequal power relations. This includes challenging assumptions that all bodies fit neatly into binary categories of female and male and that a person's anatomy, chromosomes, hormones, gender identity, and gender expression must conform to prescribed expectations.³⁵

A gender-transformative approach should ensure that school curricula, policies, facilities, and practices recognize diversity in sex characteristics and do not stigmatize or exclude intersex learners. This includes providing accurate and age-appropriate information about intersex people; training teachers and school staff; addressing bullying, discrimination, and violence; and examining gendered practices involving uniforms, bathrooms, changing facilities, sports, and other school activities.³⁶

Comprehensive sexuality education is an important part of this approach. Sexuality education that recognizes diverse sex characteristics can provide intersex learners with information that reflects their own bodies and experiences while helping all students understand human diversity, challenge misinformation and stigma, and contribute to safer learning environments.³⁷



How can we support intersex learners to thrive?

Creating safe and inclusive schools for intersex learners requires more than responding to bullying after it occurs. Schools should foster environments in which diversity in sex characteristics is understood and respected, and where intersex students can participate fully in school life without fear of stigma, unwanted disclosure, harassment, or scrutiny of their bodies. Intersex people require the space and opportunity to improve their well-being and work toward their potential in safe education environments that support the full development of their personality.³⁸

Locally informed, culturally competent training for teachers, administrators, counselors, and other adults involved in the education of intersex learners can help prevent and mitigate harm. Training should increase understanding of intersex people and variations in sex characteristics and equip school personnel to recognize, prevent, and respond appropriately to bullying, discrimination, and violence. Schools should adopt explicit antidiscrimination and anti-bullying policies that include sex characteristics, establish safe and confidential mechanisms for students to report abuse, and ensure that intersex learners have access to appropriate support when violations occur.³⁹

Intersex students themselves should be listened to and included in decisions affecting their education and well-being.



What steps should be taken to advance intersex learners' right to education?

Governments, ministries of education, schools, educators, and other stakeholders should:



Explicitly prohibit discrimination based on sex characteristics in education.

Laws, regulations, and school policies should expressly protect intersex learners from bullying, discrimination, and violence.



Adopt and enforce comprehensive anti-bullying and safeguarding policies. School policies should explicitly include sex characteristics and provide safe, accessible, and confidential mechanisms for students to report bullying, discrimination, and violence, with appropriate support and remedies when violations occur.



Include intersex people and diversity in sex characteristics in school curricula.

Provide accurate, affirmative, and age-appropriate information about intersex people and variations in sex characteristics, including through comprehensive sexuality education, so that intersex learners see their bodies and experiences reflected in their education and all learners gain a fuller understanding of human diversity.



Provide locally informed, culturally competent training for educators and school personnel.

Teachers, administrators, counselors, health personnel, coaches, and other school staff should understand intersex people and variations in sex characteristics and be equipped to recognize, prevent, and respond appropriately to bullying, discrimination, and violence.



Provide safe and private facilities for all learners.

Schools should provide access to gender-neutral bathrooms and private changing facilities without requiring intersex students to disclose their status or use separate facilities that stigmatize or isolate them.



Eliminate exclusionary gendered school policies and practices.

Policies governing uniforms, bathrooms, changing facilities, sports, extracurricular activities, and single-sex educational environments should respect intersex students' privacy, dignity, safety, and right to education and should never subject students to invasive scrutiny or examination of their bodies.



Meaningfully include intersex learners in decisions that affect them.

Schools and education policymakers should create safe, age-appropriate opportunities for intersex youth to participate in developing policies, curricula, programs, and other measures intended to protect and support them.



Invest in intersex-specific education research and data collection.

Governments, researchers, and education stakeholders should support ethical, confidential, and community-informed research on intersex learners' experiences, including school attendance and completion, bullying and violence, mental health and well-being, and the effectiveness of interventions.

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT OUTRIGHT INTERNATIONAL

Outright International works together for better LGBTIQ lives. Outright is dedicated to working with partners around the globe to strengthen the capacity of the LGBTIQ human rights movement, document and amplify human rights violations against LGBTIQ people, and advocate for inclusion and equality.

Founded in 1990, with staff in over a dozen countries, Outright works with the United Nations, regional human rights monitoring bodies, governments, humanitarian and development institutions, and civil society partners. Outright holds consultative status at the United Nations, where it serves as the secretariat of the UN LGBTI Core Group.

**Together, for better LGBTIQ lives.
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